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Bio

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Dorothy Green greets parishioners after morning service at Old Potter Church.



**MISSIONARY
BIOGRAPHY**
No. 16

Miss Dorothy of the Ozarks

By JANETTE T. HARRINGTON

PHOTOS BY JOHNNIE M. GRAY FROM GLOBE

This round-the-clock church worker finds time for everything including preaching, parish calls, children's services, radio broadcasting, nursing, keeping house. All this after she "retired"!

A GROUP of young people from the Old Potter Church in Arkansas were attending a district conference for young people at Fort Smith. After their turn had come to tell what they had been doing, they realized their report stood out almost embarrassingly above the others. "Oh, well," said one of the girls, "these other kids just don't have a Miss Dorothy."

As a thumbnail sketch of Miss Dorothy Green of Mena, Arkansas, her comment sums up the situation nicely. A one-

woman ball of fire. "Miss Dorothy" applies her energies to every phase of church activity and some community affairs as well.

Officially, her job, inherited in part from Rev. J. P. Lester, retired minister who fathered the Old Potter Church, is parish worker of the Presbyterian Board of National Missions for two rural churches at Cove and Old Potter, near Mena. On and off the job, her role adds up to potpourri of round-the-clock activity.

She preaches at morning and evening Sunday services and prayer meetings; makes parish calls; lends support to both churches' monthly guild meetings, a male-included missionary society; helps the young people with their recreational and worship programs. A big share of her time goes to holding weekly chapel services for children and youth in many of the schools in the county. She also broadcasts two local 15-minute inspirational programs, Thursday and Sunday, over KENA; does outside writing and speaking, keeps up a heavy correspondence; and belongs to the local Business and Professional Women's Club, the American Legion Auxiliary, the Harmony Club, county home demonstration group, and—curious but true—the Young Mothers' Circle of the Mena Presbyterian Church. She estimates that last year she delivered 945 sermons and talks.

Between times she looks after the family roofree. As this includes her mother, Mrs. C. A. Green, Dr. Lester and his wife, who is invalided from arthritis, an Iowa friend, Mildred McMican, and night and day nurses, this is job enough in itself to keep most people busy. For Miss Dorothy, it means sandwiching in along with everything else the cleaning, cooking and laundering, a daily ride up the mountains for Dr. Lester, and, recently, helping to remodel an old barn into an attractive modern house overlooking the valley. When someone recently asked her why she didn't ease up, she retorted, "Just what would I leave out?"

All this constitutes retirement by proxy—a state of affairs faintly reminiscent of the old gag about "the girl who wasn't hungry but look at what she et!" She went to Arkansas because the Lesters were going there to retire and she was part of their team.

Dorothy Green's association with Dr. Lester began some years ago in Red Oaks, Iowa, when she gave up a teaching career to assist her hometown pastor and longtime family friend. As a job it was a joy, because she has always regarded him as one of the most gifted preachers she had ever heard.

Suddenly a bout with the flu left Dr. Lester totally deaf—a severe blow to a minister. For a while, he kept up his church, with Dorothy calling the signals to tell him whether he was talking too loud or not at all. (She says, "Some day I'm going to write a book on 'The Doctor Doesn't Hear.' It will include humorous incidents—such as the time the famous opera star was singing in church and the doctor unwittingly began preaching right in the middle of an unaccompanied part of the solo.") But before long he had to give up, and the Lesters went to live on a farm near Storm Lake, Iowa, while Miss Dorothy took a job there as director of religious activities at Buena Vista College.

In 1937, they decided to pack up their belonging and move to the South, hoping to find an opportunity to do what good they could. You may ask—people have—why Miss Dorothy went along to Arkansas, instead of looking for greener fields elsewhere, but to her there was no question; she'd signed on as Dr. Lester's assistant and intended to stick with it.

Northwest Arkansas is a good place for people of moderate income to retire. In the heart of the Ouachita Mountains, it's as beautiful a place, scenically, as a person would want. A couple can pick up a little extra income, raising chickens or

growing a garden. While there are some tinges of localized characteristics—and quite a bit of old-style, God-fearing Americanism—the Bob Burns version of the Arkansas Traveler is definitely out. Home permanents and sunback dresses, bright sport shirts, radio and cars have wiped out the marked distinction between city and country cousins.

The Lesters had no problem in picking Arkansas, but their choice of community was purely accidental. When Dr. Lester and Miss Dorothy drove south to look the ground over, a garageman accidentally filled the car brake cylinder with oil instead of fluid. Brakeless, they caromed up and down the steep hills at considerable risk of life and limb until they luckily reached Mena and the haven of a garage.

While they waited for repairs, they looked around, liked what they saw, and bought a rundown farm at near-by Old Potter to fix over. Then they went back for Mrs. Lester (an invalid even then) and settled down to making friends of their neighbors.

At first it was hard going. Their heavy initial expenditure gave them a reputation for being people of means. This lasted until the doctor and Dorothy rolled up their sleeves and went to work on the house. They soon began to perceive a place for themselves in the tiny community. There was no church at Old Potter—only a schoolhouse and a community solidarity that kept people from going into Mena much for church. It was to fill an obvious lack that the doctor began asking people to come up to the house now and then for Bible study.

One day Miss Dorothy was talking to one of the men and asked what folks did for entertainment. "Why, Miss Dorothy, you haven't even been to a singing of an evening yet!" he replied. There was one at the schoolhouse that Sunday evening, as usual, and they went. They found the people to be ardent songsters, singing from the old shaped notes.

Nearly everyone had a turn at leading. One little five-year-old boy stood up front and soberly led the group in singing:

*"It won't be very long
'Til this sad life shall end."*

When the Presbyterian Church in Mena invited Dr. Lester to fill a vacant pulpit pro tem, people at Old Potter wanted to know why he preached in town but not out where he lived. "Well," he explained, "I've never been asked." They promptly asked him.



Football fans all, Miss Dorothy's family, including retired minister J. P. Lester, charted '52 season's games.



Miss Dorothy, officially a parish worker, preaches at morning and evening services of her two rural churches.

Soon the inspiring services preached by Dr. Lester became a Sunday night feature. Fortnightly, on a week night, folks gathered at the Lesters for Bible study followed by folk games like Old Dan Tucker or Shoo Tang Shoo.

There was no question of payment. But one morning several men showed up and started to fill the Lester's wood bin saying only, "Some folks can preach; others can cut wood." Eventually a Presbyterian church was organized, with members contributing in part to its support, and through a gift in memory of Mrs. Josephine Meneely of New York, a new stone church was built.

Meanwhile the church at Cove lost its pastor and Dr. Lester was asked to help out. In time, the church—where Morris Goff of Lum and Abner fame was born—became one of their charges. About three years ago, Dr. Lester had to give up strenuous activity, and Miss Dorothy took over altogether.

She doesn't recall that there was any particular furor over the churches' acquiring a lady preacher. In the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., women cannot be ordained, but in special circumstances may carry on the duties of the pastor with the exception of performing the wedding ceremony and administering sacraments. She has usually found a way to surmount even these difficulties. Many a couple has been united in marriage in a joint ceremony wherein she reads the service, the doctor ties the knot. Sometimes visitors look a bit surprised to find a trim lady in the pulpit, but homefolks take her on trust. Last year she was honored by being named elder of the Cove Church and by being commissioned by the Presbytery of Fort Smith.

As it turned out, the church work was to prove to be only about half of her job; her children's and youth programs she regards as perhaps her biggest opportunity. Like most such opportunities, it came about without premeditation.

During the war she taught in the high school, while the superintendent, Col. Jesse Bishop, was serving with the National Guard. With her usual enthusiasm she threw herself into coaching high school dramatics and planning recreational and worship programs for the teenagers. As a result, at war's end, two of the county schools asked her to conduct weekly chapel programs.

What she does is purely voluntary on everybody's part. At one school, the coach, who was also a Baptist lay preacher, wanted to know why some other denomination couldn't get in the act. With perfect sincerity, she answered, "Any time you

can get a minister to give the time to come out here at his own expense [as she does] I will gladly stay home." So far, she has never had to stay home.

From the children Miss Dorothy receives a warm welcome. Usually, as soon as she turns up the road into the school grounds, she can hear children's voices shouting, "Here she comes—here she comes." They may hear an "it really happened story," "it couldn't have happened story," or a "Jesus story."

For the high school age, it's just down-to-earth inspirational pep talks. A gifted story-teller, with the now-high, now-low voice range children love, she holds her audience engrossed. One day when she was called to the phone after verbally setting the stage for a "Jesus story," the whole class cried, "Miss Dorothy! You're walking right through the Sea of Galilee!"

In all, she reaches an estimated 6,000 children and young people with her stories and talks. Others besides herself point out that this is the only religious contact many of them have. By now, soldiers in Korea who are recent high-school graduates are beginning to write back, thankful to Miss Dorothy for the religious faith they have found.

The habit of "talking it over" is shared by many communicants in the two parishes, who welcome calls when they are sick or in trouble or when faraway sons are home on leave. As religiously as any minister, she makes hospital calls, holds the hands of the dying.

Her friendly good will extends to everyone. Not long ago, stopping at a strange door, she discovered an elderly lady who expressed a wistful interest in the church. On her second visit, she found her new friend upset about a coming operation; she was worried because there would be no one to look after her when she got home from the hospital. "Now don't you worry," said Miss Dorothy, "you can just move in with me for a while. There's someone there all the time and we're used to nursing."

"I believe you mean it," said the lonely woman, wonderingly.

Miss Dorothy's neighborliness really came into its own three years ago when Station KENA opened in Mena. Because she had always been interested in radio and had some talent for it, she asked the owner, R. B. Bell, to consider a radio program by her. He agreed, and she launched a twice-a-week morning program called "Wayside Chapel," beamed to housewives.



As program chairman Miss Dorothy reviews plans with members of the American Legion and the Legion Auxiliary.

Then she added a "Children's Chapel of the Air," three afternoons, which hit the youngsters just about the time they were getting home from school. Since she began her program the same way she did her school chapels—"Very gently I will walk, very gently I will talk—" the two were quickly cross-identified. One little six-year-old would run to the radio as soon as she heard her voice, crying, "Here I am, Miss Dorothy."

A heavy paid schedule of programming at Christmas time forced her first venture off the air, but she came back last spring with a new inspirational-anthology program at one o'clock Sundays. Sponsored originally by a local druggist, it is called "Prescription for Living." Her next program, "It's All Yours," was likewise sponsored. Originally patriotic in theme, it has taken a turn toward honoring Arkansas' riches. She has been asked to resume "Children's Chapel" when her time permits.

Miss Dorothy maintains that her richest source of inspiration is the people with whom she works. A few years ago she discovered at rural Old Piney a group of conscientious women who were meeting each month to painstakingly conduct their own Bible study. When they ran into a snag, one of them said, "I bet Miss Dorothy could outline the Bible for us." Miss Dorothy replied that she guessed she could, but it might take a little while. Instead, she started meeting with them.

One day they came to 1 Peter 5:8, beginning, "Be sober, be vigilant." One of the women undertook to explain it. "Be vigilant. I guess that means you've got to keep your eyes right smart open and keep a-peerin' here and there." Could any theologian say it better?

Another day, Miss Dorothy carried home to treasure an interpretation of Mark 13:33, "Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is." Said one of the women, "That's mighty right. Tain't likely you're gonna watch and pray till you've done took heed."

Even dry-docked Dr. Lester still manages to keep his end up by imparting moral support and tidbits of wisdom. "Dotty," he'll say when the going gets tough, "if people were all perfect, you'd be out of a job."

Mrs. Lester does her part, too; she prays her way through a long personal list of intercessions every morning. If anything goes wrong, she hears about it. "Carrie," they'll say, "you fell down on your job today."

Having Mildred McMican around to help out has made a great difference. A friend from Iowa, "Mil" gave up her job as Registrar of Lindenwood College in St. Charles, Missouri to spend a year with the Lesters. She's there yet, acting as Miss Dorothy's secretary and cheerful companion. The two save valuable minutes by working on the run. Miss Dorothy dictates her mail while driving to the schools and to make calls, and feels free to speak extemporaneously because "Mil" is there to get everything down in shorthand.

In all the busy hours of the week, the two generally find time for one bit of favored recreation: late night usually finds them having a cup of coffee in a downtown eating place where they can play the jukebox, joke with the young folks—and perhaps keep out a weather eye.

In her "off hours," Miss Dorothy works on the writing jobs she takes to "pay the bills." When the Board of National Missions was carrying on its own training schools in Arkansas, she wrote the daily vacation Bible school materials, using all original stories. Last spring the local Business and Professional Women's club decided to enter a national contest for a radio program on choosing a career. Miss Dorothy wrote the scripts, which won honorable mention.

For all her devotion to folks young and old, the job Miss Dorothy is doing is not the kind that can be weighed or measured. The only thing that can be said for sure is that there are two churches active now where no church was before, and that quite a number of people untouched by the church are hearing an inspirational word, with Christian overtones, over the radio and through the youth's and children's chapels.

Perhaps the spontaneous remark of a child in one of her chapels is the best answer to the value of work done by Dorothy Green and others like her. She had asked the class to be on the lookout for beautiful things that God had made.

Next day she asked, "What did you see?"

One solemn-eyed child replied, "You, Miss Dorothy."

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